

Testimony of the Honorable Carl Rhodenizer
Vice Chairman, Georgia Passenger Rail Program Management Team
before the
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation and
December 6, 2000

Thank you, Senator Cleland, for the opportunity to come before you today and talk about the Georgia Rail Passenger Program in Georgia.

I am here today representing the Program Management Team of the Georgia Rail Passenger Program. Sonny Deriso, the chairman of the PMT, could not be here today, so I am substituting in his behalf. I also serve as chairman of the Georgia Rail Passenger Authority and as a member of the Clayton County Board of Commissioners, and I am a banker and former President of the Clayton County Chamber of Commerce.

But before I go any further, let me first thank you for your support for rail program funding in the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century. Frankly, we would not be here today but for the help from you and other members of Georgia's congressional delegation in providing specific funding for rail in our state. You alone earmarked almost \$50 million for multimodal transportation corridors, and we are grateful.

I also want to thank Secretary Slater and Administrator Molitoris for responding to the PMT's request to extend the Southeast High-Speed Rail Corridor designation from Macon to Savannah, via Jesup, and to extend the Gulf Coast High-Speed Rail Corridor designation from Birmingham to Atlanta. Now, we have a firm foundation to build a high speed rail network throughout the Southeast, centered in Georgia.

Now, let me explain the PMT. About a year ago, Governor Barnes realized the need to get the state's transportation agencies on the same track. The Governor established a joint entity to guide passenger rail development in Georgia. The PMT comprises two board members each from the State Transportation Board, the Georgia

Rail Passenger Authority and the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority. The Governor appoints the Chairman, and Mr. Deriso, as the governor's appointee, has served with distinction and fairness during his tenure.

Representing the State Transportation Board are Jimmy Lester and Brad Hubbert. Representing the Rail Passenger Authority are myself and Mather Stapleton. Mr. Deriso and Sharon Gay represent GRTA.

On one year ago today – December 6th – the three agencies put into effect an agreement to serve as the mechanism for implementing effective and efficient rail passenger service in Georgia. The first substantive line of that agreement states, “the Parties recognize and agree that effective and efficient rail passenger service in Georgia can be implemented only through the cooperative and coordinated effort of the Parties,” – meaning GDOT, the rail authority and GRTA.

Senator Cleland, I believe in the year since we entered into this agreement we are doing just that.

Under our agreement, GDOT will be primarily responsible for planning, designing and constructing the rail infrastructure. GRTA will be primarily responsible for integrating local and state transportation and land use decisions with the rail passenger program. This will involve working with local governments to establish transit, bicycle and pedestrian facilities and transit oriented development to enhance the rail program. The GRPA will be primarily responsible for the actual on-going operation of passenger train service and the rail station siting, design and local government coordination.

All three agencies are jointly responsible for capital improvements, such as trackage and train sets; identifying new service needs; making signal and control system improvements; developing access and operating agreements; and generally cooperating with other transit and planning agencies to contribute to a comprehensive public transportation program for the metropolitan Atlanta Region and the State of Georgia.

To provide the necessary technical expertise, the PMT established the Rail Program Managers Committee. This committee supervises the work of the Georgia Rail Consultants. Steve Roberts, who you also will be hearing from today, is the program manager for the Georgia Rail Consultants. He will be speaking in more detail about their work.

Our consultants' work is founded upon the most recent available rail studies commissioned by GDOT, and the Multi-Modal Passenger Terminal proposed design as part of our on-going environmental assessment of the Athens-to-Atlanta and the Macon-to-Atlanta rail corridors, which we have identified as the two corridors with the highest promise for rail passenger service. The program also includes the study of potential service to Albany, Jesup, Savannah, Canton, Columbus, Bremen, Madison, Augusta, Senoia and Gainesville.

A 5,000-mile network of freight railroads crisscrosses the State of Georgia, providing an excellent opportunity to establish a passenger rail network in the state. Previous exhaustive studies of passenger travel by mode and trip preference found that Georgians would make about seven to 10 million trips a year by passenger rail if it were provided at a reasonable cost, was reliable and provided a frequency of service to meet travel needs.

Senator, we have some tough questions to answer as we prepare to recommend a passenger rail investment program. Whatever the PMT recommends to the Governor and Legislature, the next Administration and the Georgia Congressional delegation, it must be based on a sound and thorough analysis.

Here are some principles that I think are important:

One, corridor analysis of transportation alternatives must examine every practical alternative on these corridors to arrive at the highest value return of the preferred alternative.

Two, the preferred alternative must be competitive with other forms of transportation in terms of time, cost, comfort and convenience.

Three, we need to keep the big picture in focus. We are not just talking about running commuter and inter-city trains to Atlanta. We are part of a larger regional effort that will lead to the development of a high-speed passenger rail network in the Southeast. We now have that foundation of a high-speed network that I spoke of earlier. The business community, led by the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, is excited about the potential of a high speed transportation alternative to other major cities in the Southeast and the whole Eastern seaboard.

The task before all of us is a heavy responsibility. I pledge to you, and the entire Georgia Congressional Delegation, that we will do everything possible to implement this Rail Passenger Program.

Thank you.